

CHINESE CARPETS

“Take off all your clothes,” the psychiatrist said, “and lie down on the couch.
I obeyed.

I was twenty-six. This was my first visit to the psychiatrist. I was, I suppose, depressed.

He was a stranger to me, an eminent doctor whose rooms were high up in a glassy city building. His hair in long white wizard locks hung down to his shoulders. The carpets were made from Chinese silk; the armchairs were of luxurious leather, traditional. In glass cases there stood collections of jade ornaments—small and large animals, buddhas, milky green trees.

Memory, as you will see, serves me badly, but I fancy there was an undertone of lovely soothing music. Religious? Classical? Eastern? There was a hush, a sacred atmosphere.

Take off all your clothes.

As I lay naked and uncovered on the high couch, the doctor, in a reverent silence, slowly and ritually placed the palms of his hands here and there all over my body.

His eyes were closed. Then he whispered to me to sit up, and as he touched me with one hand, standing slightly to the side and behind me, he caressed himself with the other hand.

The doctor was wanking.

This was the finest psychiatric help a person could get in Melbourne in the sixties.

The session was almost over. The doctor gestured to me to put on my clothes. He had a habit of gesturing—I see this now as a kind of ballet-master’s technique. I remember now my white Swiss lawn underwear and some lipstick pink shoes with very high heels, but the outer garments escape me. This is a bit odd—I usually have a good memory for clothes. I wonder how it was that he could sit there at his imposing desk and look me in the eye and tell me I was inhabited by evil. I wonder how it was that I could sit there

on the other side of the desk, look him in the eye and somehow accept what he was telling me. There was a certain something hypnotic in his eyes, his manner, his theatrical surroundings. I can now imagine myself as a small creature falling under the spell of a powerful serpent.

“You are inhabited by evil,” he said, “and so I would like you to come to a meditation session. My secretary will book that for you.” Those words of his now appear to me to be ludicrous and bizarre, but I booked the meditation session and left the doctor’s rooms. I walked past the jade ornaments and went out into the lobby where I got into the lift and returned to the ground floor. I had been high up in the clouds somewhere, high up in the glassy building. Up there in a room with a strange (very strange) man. I had sat naked on his couch while he felt my body, while he sort of hummed and jacked off quietly.

Not only was he an eminent psychiatrist, but of course he was a clever one. He knew I wasn’t going to do on him. He also knew that even if I did talk about what had happened, I’d find it hard to get people to believe me. After all, *I* was the mad one; he was the expensive, exclusive doctor to whom everyone deferred. He ministered to the minds of the very best people. Nobody would believe me.

I didn’t even think about being believed. I try now to analyse what I thought and felt, and I come up with the idea that I was more depressed than I had been before I went to the doctor, that I was bewildered, humiliated, ashamed. I was also shocked. And I actually had no language for what had happened. I would scarcely have been able to describe the event even if I had wanted to, and I didn’t want to. I recently read of a case in which women took their psychiatrist to court, accusing him of sexual abuse. The doctor’s defence was that the women were unreliable because they were mentally ill, and he suggested that they were all imagining and hallucinating the events.

But the real mystery in my own case lies in that fact that I *returned* to this doctor; I went back to his meditation class. I got into the lift again another day and pressed the button and went sailing up into the sky, left the earth and entered the muted rooms where my shoes moved silently over the Chinese carpets. People must have been there in the meantime with noisy vacuum cleaners; somebody must have dusted and polished the jade animals and buddhas. I imagine there would have been vases of beautiful flowers, but I don’t really remember. Some things I now remember; some things I don’t.

This time I went into a room where there were several large leather armchairs—so very, very luxurious—great dreamy armchairs, the ultimate in armchairs. One big daddy of an armchair faced into the room, and the other chairs were arranged so that the people in them could see the big daddy chair

but could not easily look at each other. The room was dim; the doctor began intoning words of peace and comfort in a low, perhaps hypnotic tone. We had to have our eyes shut. At some point the doctor got silently out of his chair and moved around the room, placing his hands on the patients. I was cheating; I had my eyes a little open so that I observed him as he glided among us. The whole thing felt sinister to me and tears began to fall from my eyes. He put his hand on my hand and I began to sob. At this point he gestured to the nurse who was standing in the doorway. He told her to take me out of the room, and said he didn't ever want to see me again. I have wondered why he was so vehement about this.

For the last time I crossed the Chinese carpet, went down in the lift, and was returned to earth. I was by now even more depressed, bewildered and ashamed.

I told nobody. And at some point I *began to forget* what had taken place on these two occasions between me and the psychiatrist. I don't mean to make a big deal out of the two visits to this doctor—and in fact I now know that what he did to me on the first visit was more or less routine. And I know of course that plenty of people have received much, much worse treatment at the hands of their psychiatrists. What surprises me about myself is that I forgot, so successfully, all about it. And what amazes me is that nobody blew the whistle on him. (I should tell you that he's dead now.)

Forgetting was a desperate act. But here I come to the part that really interests me—how come I now remember?

About fifteen years after I was expelled from the meditation session, I wrote a novel called *Cherry Ripe*. One of the characters in this book was a psychiatrist called Dr Goddard who had a short walk-on part. When I created him I experienced the thrill familiar to fiction writers that comes when you feel you have successfully invented a strong character with a kind of life of its own. By this time my memory of the two visits to the psychiatrist had completely disappeared, and I was under the sincere impression that I was inventing the character. I was so pleased with the creation of Dr Goddard that I would sometimes read his section of the book to other people. Twice I was vigorously attacked from the audience for my unkind representation of a member of the psychiatric profession. When I say "attacked" I mean that people in the audience told me I was not only wrong, but mad, dangerous and positively evil.

The memory remained buried. I became fascinated by the events at Chelmsford Hospital where psychiatric patients were given Deep Sleep Therapy which caused, in some cases, death. I collected press cuttings and

TV documentaries and began talking to people who had been at Chelmsford. I kept wondering how it could be that people would put themselves so thoroughly in the power of a psychiatrist. I now know that I actually knew the answer to this question because I had already had the experience.

My research into the events at Chelmsford developed into the inspiration for the novel *The White Garden* which I wrote while still blocking my memory of the psychiatrist. The research took many years; the writing itself took two years. And still the memory lay buried.

In September this year *The White Garden* was published, and the day after I had received a number of copies of the book I woke up in the morning feeling as if I had jet-lag. I realised that I was deeply, deeply anxious about the book, much more anxious than I had ever been about a book before. I lay in bed and made myself a blanket of books, copies of *The White Garden*, and stayed under them until I felt better—it was the only thing I could think of, and it worked. I knew at the time that it was a pretty peculiar thing to do.

A few days after this, Matthew Condon interviewed me about *The White Garden* asking me about the creation of the character of Dr Goddard. I told him about the first appearance of a psychiatrist in my fiction, the Dr Goddard of *Cherry Ripe*, and then I showed him the pages from that early novel. Afterwards I re-read those pages, and as I did so the memory of my two visits to the psychiatrist in the sixties came back to me. The memory had been dormant for nearly thirty years, and during those years I had unknowingly created the character of Dr Goddard, and put him in two novels, making him, in the later book, the principal character. I suppose now that much of my strange anxiety about the new novel had its origins in the buried memory. The carpets and the jade ornaments were real. The most important part, though, is that the feeling was genuine. I wrote all this because I knew how it felt, and I had a passionate need to tell.

People often ask writers where their ideas for their fiction originate; I have truly never known the answer to that question, and I think that now I know even less. (I have imagined that what the doctor meant by “evil” was perhaps my nascent fiction writer’s ability to recreate him in stories. Was he clever enough to guess that?) But I do know that the writing of *The White Garden* was a long, slow, painful and desperate act of great personal significance.

I wonder, had I remembered about the psychiatrist, whether I would have written the book, but that question is unanswerable. I think I would still have done it. I know that as I was writing it I kept thinking people would ridicule what I was saying, but I felt compelled to say it anyway. And now I imagine my claim to what has come to be known as “repressed memory” will be the subject of ridicule. But again, I feel compelled to explain and explore. The

book was deeply painful to write, and this piece also has been written with tears in my eyes and an ache in my throat. I weep partly for the passive young stranger I was; I weep for the time I have spent not knowing; I weep for the other women who have suffered to lesser and greater degrees from doctors like mine. Some of them, remember, did not cross the Chinese carpets and escape into the lifts; some of them died.